DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 256 184 FL 015 037

AUTHOR De Jesus, Socorro
TITLE Predictors of English Writing Performance of Native Spanish-Speaking College Freshmen.
PUB DATE 84
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (35th, New York, NY, March 29-31, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; College Freshmen; *English (Second Language); Grades (Scholastic); Higher Education; *Predictor Variables; Puerto Ricans; *Spanish; Spanish Speaking; Student Motivation; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS Puerto Rico

ABSTRACT

A study of the relationship between Spanish and English writing proficiency had as subjects 344 native Spanish-speaking college freshmen, students of English as a second language (ESL), in five universities in Puerto Rico. A questionnaire and four writing tasks in English and Spanish were administered in ESL class, and student scores on standardized tests and high school grade point averages were gathered from records. Results of correlations indicate that the best predictors of English writing proficiency were the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB) ESL Achievement Test and the Spanish writing proficiency test, and the largest contributing variable associated with aptitude was the CEEB Scholastic Aptitude Test in verbal reasoning. Motivation tests indicated that integratively-motivated students wrote better than instrumentally-motivated students. It was also found that the students had little exposure to English outside the classroom, making exposure to English a negligible predictor, and that graduates of private and church-affiliated schools performed better than others. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED256184

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

Predictors of English Writing Performance of Native Spanish-Speaking College Freshmen

Socorro De Jesús
Hostos Community College
1984

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Socorro De Jesús

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

INTRODUCTION

At the time of this study (1982), a vast amount of research had been conducted to identify variables that might explain the diversity of ability in second-language learning. However, very few studies had directly investigated the relation that native language (L1) proficiency has to second language (L2) proficiency. Of those studies found, none dealt with the main concern of this study—to compare L1 and L2 writing proficiency in order to determine if L1 writing ability can account for L2 writing ability.

In general, most of the studies found were directed at correlating reading abilities in the L1 and L2 of children and adolescents in bilingual programs (Bezanson & Hawkes, 1976; Cziko, 1976; Greaney, 1977; Lopez-Emslie, 1981; Oller, Baca & Vigil, 977; Skutnabb-Kangas & Toukomaa, 1976; Swain, Lapkin & Barik, 1976; Tucker, 1975). Of the four comparative studies found that were directed at writing, the only one that made a comparison of L1 and L2 writing samples of the same subjects was interested in the contrastive analysis of the writing and not in a correlation of L1 and L2 proficiency (Santiago, 1970).

The central purpose of the study was to investigate the relationship that exists between the Spanish and English writing proficiency of college freshmen in Puerto Rico. A secondary concern was to determine how other variables of interest might account for or affect this relationship. Subjects included in the study were 344 native Spanish-speaking college freshmen in five universities in Puerto Rico.

FL015037

METHOD

A questionnaire and four writing tasks, two in Spanish and two in English, were administered to each participant during two visits to the ESL classes. In addition, the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB) SAT and Achievement Test scores as well as the high-school grade-point average (GPA) for each subject were obtained from the Admissions Office of each participating university.

The questionnaire, which was initially administered to approximately 850 students, had a dual purpose:

1. to screen subjects—only those students who (a) were native speakers of Spanish, (b) had studied only in schools where Spanish was the sole medium of instruction and in which English had been taught as an L2, and (c) had not visited or lived in an English-speaking country for more than three months were included in the final analyses, and

2. to gather information on other correlates of interest.

Only 344 of the initial 850 subjects remained after the entire screening process took place.

The four 20-minute writing tasks elicited writing in the expository mode on four different but comparable topics. No subject wrote on the same topic twice, regardless of language. Each of the four writing samples was independently scored by two trained readers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Only those variables that contributed significantly in the multiple- regression analysis will be discussed. Most of the results were obtained in direct response to two research questions.

Research Question #1. What correlation exists between the level of Spanish writing proficiency and the level of English writing proficiency of native Spanish-speaking freshman college students in Puerto Rico? Both writing-proficiency scores in Spanish and English were derived by a composite score for each of two compositions in each language. Each composition, in turn, had been scored holistically by two readers. Analysis of performance on the two composite scores resulted in a Pearson product-moment correlation of .41 which yielded significance at the .01 level between Spanish and English writing proficiency.

The studies reported in Oller and Perkins (1978), Cummins (1982), and Lopez-Emslie (1981), directed at reading proficiency in L1 and L2, show that a relationship exists between L1 and L2 language proficiency. This study found a moderate correlation between L1 and L2 writing proficency among Spanish- speaking students in an L1-dominant culture, thus, exploring another aspect of language proficiency to determine if L2 language proficiency is related to L1 language proficiency.

If findings on future studies comparing L1 and L2 writing proficiency of ESL students similar to those in this study show significant correlations, then it might be reasonable to assume that having a good control of the aspects related to writing in the native language (e.g., ability to develop and organize ideas clearly) could bring about better performance in L2 writing.

Research Question #2. How do variables such as type of motivation for learning in English, exposure to English outside of the academic setting, scholastic aptitude, prior scholastic achievement in Spanish, English and mathematics, high-school grade-point average, socio-economic status, type of high school attended, and sex help to account for the relationship between Spanish and English writing proficiency? After subjecting all the variables to the multiple-regression analysis, it was found that although Spanish writing proficiency continues to play a significant role in

predicting performance in English writing proficiency, its contribution is weaker than that of the ESL Achievement Test. The single best predictor of English writing proficiency was the CEEB ESL Achievement Test (CEB.ENG), which accounted for 30.6% of the total explained variance. The second best predictor was Spanish writing proficiency (SPANTOT), which accounted for 10.5% of the explained variance. These findings would then seem to imply two things: (a) command of grammar and syntactical structures are important aspects of writing, and (b) as a result, a test which measures skills in grammar manipulation is the best indicator of writing skills, a contention which has been held by ESL researchers and teachers. Nonetheless, it is difficult to make this contention based on this study since the ESL Achievement Test score is a composite score of several parts: grammar, syntax, and reading comprehension. Therefore, there is no way to isolate the effect or relationship of the first two parts to English writing ability.

Of the variables associated with scholastic aptitude, the only one which emerged as a significant contributor to predicting English writing proficiency was the CEEB Scholastic Aptitude Test in verbal reasoning (SAT-V), which contributed 5.2% of the total variance. This finding might be seen as lending some support to Bruder's contention (1979) that a good L2 learner is one who has a good knowledge of L1 grammar and ability to do language-analysis tasks (e.g., the exercises on analogy and sentence completion on the SAT).

Motivation for learning English (MOTLRN) was measured by an adaption of Gardner's 1959 Orientation Index. In the multiple-regression analysis, type of motivation was significant at the .01 level, which seems to imply that integratively-motivated students write better than instrumentally-motivated ones. Nonetheless, it is probably not a good predictor of writing ability in English since it contributed only 1.2% of the variance.

Regardless of the results, the central issue of motivation may not be what type of motivation a student has for learning English (or any subject for that matter), but rather how intense or urgent such motivation is. In other words, "a language can be learned well despite the presence of anti-integrative motives among learners as long as there is a sense of immediacy entailing such motives" (Alptekin, 1981, p. 277). It might well be that students in Puerto Rico do not believe that such an urgency for learning English in Puerto Rico exists. Their "here and now" philosophy toward life (Viñas de Vázquez, 1976) as well as the almost non-existent English environment would not permit them to see English as being important to their present existence and survival. In any event the questionnaire may have forced choices upon the students that concealed a total lack of motivation in those cases when the only reason for enrolling in English was that it was a requirement (i.e., imposed upon them). Perhaps a more open-ended type questionnaire would have revealed this.

In spite of the debate in the literature as to the best environment for learning a second language (see Krashen, 19765), it is clear from the results that the subjects in this study have very little exposure outside of the classroom, and, as a result, their main exposure to English is through the classroom (i.e., formal learning). Although these students were attending college on that part of the island where English is most frequently used (i.e., the metropolitan area), on the average they speak English less than one hour per week, listen to music in English 3.2 hours per day, see television programs and movies in English about 14 hours per month, and read in English only 2.5 hours a month. Based on these results, it would then seem that outside the San Juan metropolitan area, exposure to English outside the classroom is virtually nil.

Of the eight exposure variables, only two were significant in the multiple-regression analysis at the .01 level: listening to American music (EXPOS 4) and speaking English at school (EXPOS 1-C). However, together they only contributed 2.5% of the variance. As a result, it seems that exposure to English outside the classroom is probably not a good predictor of writing ability in Puerto Rico.

In general the findings related to the amount of exposure to English outside the academic setting lead one to conclude that (a) English is not as widely spoken in Puerto Rico as some people contend and is still used only for definite and limited purposes by the majority of people who use it as Cebollero pointed out in 1937, and (b) those situations in which English is encountered on the Island (e.g., through the mass media) are not conducive to the improvement of writing in English since the language is encountered on a receptive rather than a productive level.

It is possible that exposure as well as motivation would be more strongly related to writing proficiency if the study were conducted among students who completed high school in Spanish-speaking locales (e.g., Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic), but who are also enrolled in ESL courses in a mainland United States college or university or in a university in a truly bilingual society. In either of these two environments, an English-dominant culture or a culture where English is definitely a second language, English would be encountered more frequently and be more influential or necessary to the students.

Students who were graduates of private schools did better on all achievement measures, including English writing proficiency. Interestingly, those who graduated from church-affiliated schools (mainly Catholic schools) did better than those from private non-sectarian schools. In the multiple-regression analysis, the two variables representing high-school type emerged as significant factors, but together contributed to only 2.5% of the total variance.

These findings could be attributed to a number of possible factors, among these being the possibility that there was a higher percentage of native English-speaking teachers or better prepared ESL teachers at the private schools than at the public schools. According to Viñas de Vázquez (1976), one of the greatest problems affecting the teaching of English in the public schools in Puerto Rico is the shortage of adequately prepared ESL teachers. It seems logical, if simplistic, that better-prepared ESL teachers would represent better role models and, in addition, possess better techniques and methods of teaching writing skills than those inadequately prepared.

None of the other variables were significant in the multiple-regression analysis. See the table below for the multiple correlations and relevant statistics of the relationship among all the independent variables with English writing proficiency as the dependent variable.

Multiple Regression Analysis of Independent Variables with English Writing Proficiency as the Dependent Variable

Variable	r	B[a]	F	p
SPANTOT	.43	.247	28.88	.01
SES	-.16	.031	0.47	-
HST 1	.23	.070	2.29	.01
HST 2	.12	.072	2.99	.01
SAT-V	.46	.113	3.90	.01
SAT-M	.33	.021	0.08	-
CEB.ENG	.65	.469	92.17	.01
CEB.MATH	.31	.064	0.81	-
CEB.SPAN	.48	.070	1.18	-
GPA	.23	.013	0.05	-
SEX	.03	.016	0.13	-
EXPOS 1-A	.02	.027	0.40	-
EXPOS 1-B	.11	.013	0.09	-
EXPOS 1-C	.10	.069	2.56	.01
EXPOS 1-D	.13	.036	0.68	-
EXPOS 2-A	.15	.016	0.08	-
EXPOS 2-B	.19	-.001	0.00	-
EXPOS 3	.20	.042	0.95	-
EXPOS 4	.20	.082	3.01	.01
MOTLRN	.11	.103	6.20	.01

Note. df = 20,261.

[a]B = beta weight

CONCLUSIONS

According to the findings of this study, if an entering college-level Spanish-speaking student writes well in English it is likely that he would also exhibit the following characteristics:

1. a good knowledge of English grammar and syntax and adequate reading skills as reflected by the CEB-ENG test score;
2. adequate writing skills in Spanish as reflected by the SPANTOT score;
3. adequate critical-thinking and analytical skills as reflected by the SAT-V test score,
4. a private-school education, and
5. an integrative-type motivation for learning English, which would lead him to seek opportunities to encounter English.

Since this was the first study undertaken in Puerto Rico to determine the relationship of Spanish and English writing proficiency, additional studies correlating Spanish and English writing ability among this population are suggested to further define the relationship that exists among them. The following studies are also recommended:

1. replication of the study with other college freshmen in the same part of Puerto Rico as well as other parts of the Island to see if results are similar to those in this study.
2. replication of the study with college freshmen in ESL as well as EFL classes but in other Spanish-speaking locales,
3. replication of the study with bilingual college freshmen who are considered competent in both Spanish and English, to see if there is a higher correlation between their writing proficiency in the two languages than in this study (it could be done in Puerto Rico as well as on the mainland United States in order to have more bases of comparison),

4. replication of the study among native Spanish-speaking students who completed high school in Spanish-speaking locales, especially in Puerto Rico, but who are enrolled in ESL courses in a college or university on the mainland United States, and

5. similar correlational studies of Spanish and English reading proficiency (i.e., literacy-related skills) among Puerto Rican college freshmen to determine whether a significant relationship exists in this other cognitively demanding proficiency area.

References

Alptekin, C. Sociopsychological and pedagogic considerations in L2 acquisition. TESOL Quarterly, September 1981, 15(3), 275-284

Bezanson, K. A., & Hawkes, N. Bilingual reading skills of primary school children in Ghana. Working Papers in Bilingualism, 1976, no. 11, 44-73

Bruder, M. Relationship of metalinguistic skills to proficiency in foreign language learning. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1979). Dissertation Abstracts International, 1980, 40, 4569A. (University Microfilms No. 8004853)

Cebollero, P. A. Suggestions for a language policy for the public schools in Puerto Rico. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Teachers College of Columbia University, 1937

Cummins, J. The role of primary language development in promoting educational success for language minority students. Manuscript submitted for publication, 1982

Cziko, G. The effects of language sequencing on the development of bilingual reading skills. The Canadian Modern Language Review, 1976, 32, 534-539

Greaney, V. Review of reading research in the Republic of Ireland. In V. Greaney (Ed.), Studies in reading. Dublin, Ireland: Educational Co. of Ireland, 1977

Krashen, S. D. Formal and informal linguistic environments in language acquisition and language learning. TESOL Quarterly, June 1976, 10(2), 157-168

Lopez-Emslie, J. R. The role of oral language and reading in the transfer of skills from Spanish to English reading. (Doctoral dissertation, New Mexico State University, 1981). Dissertation Abstracts International, 1981, 42, 632A. (University Microfilms No. 8116588)

Oller, J. W., Baca, L., & Vigil, F. Attitudes and attained proficiency in ESL: A sociolinguistic study of Mexican-Americans in the Southwest. TESOL Quarterly, June 1977, 11(2), 173-182

Oller, J. W., & Perkins, K. Intelligence and language proficiency as sources of variance in self-reported affective variables. Language Learning, June 1978, 28(1), 85-97

Santiago, R. L. A contrastive analysis of some rhetorical aspects in the writing in Spanish and English of Spanish-speaking students in Puerto Rico. (Doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, 1970). Dissertation Abstracts International, 1971, 31, 6368A-6369A. (University Microfilms No. 71-14, 334)

Skutnabb-Kangas, T., & Toukomaa, P. Teaching migrant children's mother tongue and learning the language of the host country in the context of the sociocultural situation of the migrant family. Helsinki, Finland: Finnish National Commission for UNESCO, 1976

Swain, M., Lapkin, S., & Barik, H. C. The Cloze test as a measure of second language proficiency for young children. Working Papers in Bilingualism, 1976, no. 11, 32-43

Tucker, G. R. The development of reading skills within a bilingual program. In S. S. Smiley & J. C. Towner (Eds.), Language and reading. Bellingham, Wash.: Western Washington State College, 1975

Viñas de Vázquez, P. The teaching of English in Puerto Rico. Unpublished manuscript, 1976. Revised article from TESOL Newsletter, 1973, 6(3), 1-2